



← Dr. Singh's band, Funkadesi, blends musical styles from all over the world.



# SINGH IT LOUD

Tales of a rock-and-roll (and indo-Caribbean-funk) ophthalmologist.

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**W**hen I was a second-year medical student, a friend asked me to go see a new band's first gig. The band, Funkadesi, played an eclectic mix of Indian, funk, reggae, and some straight-up rock. I noticed they didn't have a keyboard player, so I walked up in the middle of the show and said, "I'm a keyboard player. If you ever need one, let me know." The next thing I knew, I was playing with them almost every weekend.

The band was like a drug. It was a way to escape all the stress of school and help me deal with the other stresses of life. It took me to another world. When you're onstage and you have locked in with each other to create that perfect sound, an amazing feeling comes over you. It's similar to when surgery goes so well that you think, "God, that felt really good." Or when your technique is flawless and efficient, and you step back and think, "Dang, I want to do that again."

When I'm really stressed out, performing and practicing with the band resets me. It helps me calm down and often recharges me, especially after a busy week of clinic and surgeries. To have that balance helps me in many areas of my life, even now.

## ABOUT THE BAND

The band is truly diverse in many ways. We have members from India, Africa, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. We come from different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, and our backgrounds and musical tastes are different, too. There are people like me, who grew up in Wisconsin listening to Guns N' Roses, Depeche Mode, and Erasure, and then there is our drummer, Kwame Steve Cobb, who toured with Ramsey Lewis alongside Earth, Wind & Fire. We have members who grew up listening to and playing funk, blues, and reggae. One of our lead singers is a Jamaican

reggae singer, born in Montego Bay, and another lead singer came here from South India about 20 years ago. Our religious beliefs range from Christianity to Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, and Islam. The band takes diversity to another level.

Not only do we express our diversity through the music, but we constantly educate each other regarding tolerance and cultural sensitivity. I've learned much about each of the members' cultural backgrounds, which has helped me open my own mind to seeing not only what makes us different from each other but also what binds us together. This in turn has helped me become a better doctor. The band has shaped my communication skills by helping me to find that commonality with the other members, which, in turn, has been a huge benefit in connecting with patients.

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### **ECLECTIC SOUND**

The diversity also gives our music an incredible, unique sound. We might start with a straight-up hip hop beat and then lay a traditional Punjabi bhangra dhol rhythm on top of it. Those two rhythms from different parts of the world create a nice pocket, but when our bass player adds an electric bass line it assumes an even funkier vibe. On top of that, we often add other percussion and instrumentation, including conga, tabla, cajon, timbales, guitar, saxophone, flute, vibes, and even sitar. All of a sudden, we have created this eclectic sound that has formed naturally and is not contrived. It doesn't sound like we're just trying to fit various sounds together; rather, it is a natural amalgam of rhythms that inherently flow together. Every time we are on stage, even though it's been 20-plus years that the band has been together, I still get pumped when I hear these guys play. They're incredible.

### **OPENING FOR PRINCE**

One night in 2013, we were the headliners at City Winery in Chicago. It's a

great venue with a cozy, funky vibe. We got a call in the afternoon from someone at the venue who asked, "Hey, do you guys mind cutting your set list short and having someone else come after you? And you opening up for this other band?" We were annoyed. "What? No way, man!" The caller then said, "Trust me, it's Prince." "Prince who?" we replied. "Prince of what?" Yes, it turned out it was *that* Prince.

Prince arrived later than scheduled, 2:30 am, but of course he was still incredible. If you're a musician, or if you love music, to see this musician command the audience and command his band was awe-inspiring. I was about 15 feet from my idol, watching him perform. We've also had the honor of opening for artists such as Chaka Khan, Los Lobos, the Neville Brothers, and a variety of other bands. For a small, independent band to have all of these opportunities, we have been truly lucky.

### **EVOLUTION**

I love performing live, but I also do a fair amount of writing and recording. I

wrote many of the songs on our latest album, and some of the tracks have been recorded in my home studio. When we perform live, I mostly play keyboards, but at home I often play guitar, bass, drums, and a number of other instruments to lay down the initial tracks. Each band member then takes those tracks and adds his or her own creativity to form our Funkadesi sound. Whether for a large corporation or kids in school, the band is now looking to branch out to educate others on diversity and culture through our music.

Music has a way of bringing people together. As our original drummer, who unfortunately passed away a few years ago, would say, "Bra, a 4/4 rhythm is a 4/4 rhythm in Africa, in India, and in Jamaica. It fits in anywhere you go. We all have the same rhythm." This is what makes us human. Funkadesi is spreading the music, the message, and the love.

To listen to Funkadesi, visit [www.funkadesi.com/home/](http://www.funkadesi.com/home/) or look for our music and videos on YouTube and iTunes. ■